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# Women's Concerns

Report



## Women in ministry: Progress and backlash

My interest in the forward and backward movement of women in ministry stems in part from my own experiences as teacher and occasional preacher in Mennonite and Mennonite Brethren (MB) circles. The experiences of friends and colleagues have made it clear that obstacles and opposition remain even in denominational settings where women are officially affirmed in ministerial or leadership roles. My conversations with women involved in ministry and teaching over the past several years are marked by stories of struggle.



What does “progress” look like? For some women it has meant finding ways to keep the conversation going even at the cost of not quite being themselves or not quite being honest. As one woman explained, “I have found I can’t be who I am or do my job the way I would like to without getting in trouble for it.” For some women progress has meant leaving for settings where they can be more truly themselves.

The topic of women in ministry may seem old to some. This is certainly the reaction from some of my students when, for the umpteenth time, I raise gender issues in relationship to ministry, worship and language usage. But the stories in this edition of *Report* are current. The reality is that the issues are ongoing. There has been progress. There are things to celebrate. But there continue to be setbacks, opposition and even backlash against women in more visible leadership roles.

The five stories that follow show this mixed reality of women in ministry. The three poems included also mark movement, from the long-accepted contribution of quilting in “Women of the Cloth” (Jean Janzen) to the problematic questioning attitude in “questions i asked my mother” (Di Brandt) to the new vision of acceptance in “n.” (Audrey Poetker-Thiessen).

My hope is that this edition of *Report* creates a forum in which to celebrate and affirm the progress of women in ministry and renews a sense of solidarity in the midst of the ongoing struggle. I long for the day when the vision of Audrey Poetker-Thiessen’s poem “n.” is a reality—when daughters, including those who are preachers, storytellers and teachers, are no longer strangers among our people.

—Laura Schmidt Roberts, compiler

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by Bonnie Kline Smeltzer

## A woman's voice from the pulpit

I've been in pastoral ministry for 17 years. I spent five of those years as an associate pastor in a specialized ministry and the last 12 in a pastoral team with my husband. As I look back over these years and try to discern the progress and backlash for women in ministry, and myself in particular, several scenes come to mind.

### Scene one: During my first five years of ministry

The Sunday morning service is over and I'm greeting people as they leave the sanctuary. An elder saint of the congregation comes to me and says, "I'm glad to hear a woman's voice from the pulpit. It reminds me of all the women who have nurtured me in my faith. When I hear you preach I remember my mother and my grandmother. . . ."

I didn't hear the rest of his words that morning. I'm sure this elder saint never realized what a gift he had given me. Fresh out of seminary and in my first pastorate, I was afraid to preach. I thought I was too young and didn't have enough life experience to say anything "meaningful" to my parishioners. But his words cut right through my fear and gave me the encouragement I needed to develop my preaching skills. Little did I know then how those same words would carry me through some of the experiences of discrimination and prejudice I was yet to encounter.

### Scene two: 12 years ago

Soon after my husband and I began our current team ministry I discovered that several members of the church were no longer attending because they did not want a woman for a pastor. Even though I knew that there were

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also other reasons involved in their departure, I was upset because these members hadn't even given me a chance. At best, they had written me off because of my gender. At worst they had used

my gender as their public excuse for leaving the fellowship. Regardless of how I reasoned my way through the situation, at a gut level I couldn't shake the notion that I was a problem for these folks. The situation created the kind of turmoil within me that needed comfort and reassurance. I could rationalize all I wanted from my head but it was my heart that needed soothing. The words of the elder saint came back to me, "I'm glad to hear a woman's voice from the pulpit. . . ." And now, almost 15 years later, those same words brought me comfort once again.

### Scene three: During the last year

I was directing a wedding rehearsal in which the groom was from our congregation and the bride's family came from a different Christian tradition. My husband and I were asked to conduct the service together. However, I was leading the rehearsal since I had planned the ceremony with the couple and had done all of their premarital counseling. We had just completed the initial "walk-through" when the bride sheepishly approached me and said, "We have a problem. I need to talk with you. Is it all right if Ken pronounces us husband and wife? My Dad isn't comfortable with you doing that part of the service, Bonnie."

My mind rehearsed a million responses to that question as the wedding party was coming back into the sanctuary. I considered "from-the-gut" responses like, "You've got to be kidding!" or, "Whose wedding is this? Yours, or your father's?" I also thought of responses like, "No! It's not all right. I've worked with you for the last six months and helped you plan this service. I'm going to pronounce you married," or, "I understand your father is having a problem with this, but what do you want? Let's start there and then decide how to deal with your father."

And finally, what actually came out of my mouth was, "Sure we can work that out." I was so caught off guard

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by the bride's request that I squelched the anger that was rising inside of me. I didn't want to create a scene. And besides, I kept telling myself, it doesn't matter who says the words. But all the while I was feeling that it did matter to me! And it certainly did matter to the father of the bride.

The day of the wedding my husband did the marriage pronouncement saying, "By the power vested in *us* as ministers of the gospel *we* pronounce you husband and wife." Even though I didn't say the words I felt that at least I was a part of them.

These three scenes in a small way illustrate the progress and the backlash of women in ministry as reflected in my own experience. Scene one was very instrumental in the development of my pastoral identity, especially as a preacher. This experience made me realize how important it is for women to be affirmed uniquely as women in ministry. It helped me realize I brought a different and delightful presence to the pulpit that God would use to share the gospel. Having this experience early in my ministry was critical for me. I'm sure that it helped me weather some of the resistance I received in those early years. Some 15 years later it is still the words of that elder saint I go back to when I encounter folks who have a "problem" with women in the ministry.

Most of the time I can gladly proclaim the progress that has taken place for women in ministry. Yet it is situations like scene three that can throw even a seasoned pastor like myself for a loop. When I am confronted with being a "problem" for someone as a woman in ministry (which actually doesn't happen very often) I feel like I'm back at square one, trying to justify my call to ministry all over again. Then it becomes easy, at least at a feeling level, to wonder if women in the ministry have made any progress at all. I wonder how many years it will take before women in the ministry are no longer a novelty. After all, I've been doing this day in and day out for 17 years now. It's certainly not a novelty for me any more.

And yet when all the dust from my mental mind games settles, I remember that in the grand scheme of things, my tenure in ministry is actually a very short time. I

remember that even though there are five other full-time clergywomen in our community, most of my colleagues are male. I remember that there are many people who have never seen or worked with a woman in ministry. I remember that I am the first woman pastor many people have ever met. I remind myself not to be surprised at these facts of life but instead to enjoy the adventure of breaking new ground. Breaking ground is hard work, and I sometimes forget to look back and see the progress we've made.

While I can't give statistics, I would like to share some impressions I have of the progress women in the ministry have made in the Church of the Brethren.

1. Sizeable numbers of women continue to pursue seminary education and other ministry training programs. While women continue to be among the last persons placed in our congregational call system, they are finding work and being widely accepted.
2. Seminarians have a larger pool of experienced clergywomen to draw upon for field education supervision, mentor relationships and support.
3. Clergywomen have been instrumental in the development of Ministerial and Congregational Ethics statements for the denomination. Their perspectives and concerns are integral in these statements.
4. Women, both clergy and laity, hold a variety of leadership positions in all levels of denominational life. No longer tokens, they are recognized by many for their gifts and skills and experience.
5. As of June 1998, the Executive Director of the denomination's program board is a clergywoman.

I also see exciting strides in the congregation I currently serve.

1. While some people initially may have looked to my husband as the "senior pastor," we were quickly recognized as pastors on an equal basis, with different styles and skills for ministry. We are seen and treated as individuals.
2. People feel free to ask either one of us, or both of us, to officiate at special services like weddings or funerals. In fact, my husband thinks I get asked more

**"I also thought of responses like, 'No! It's not all right. I've worked with you for the last six months and helped you plan this service. I'm going to pronounce you married.'"**

**"But although I was a three-year resident of that academic community, I accumulated only a total of 21 hours of credit. In addition to being a student I was a spouse working one-half time to support our family and a mother with an infant daughter. The realities of balancing academic work and personal life were already overwhelming."**

often than he does, and that's okay. Each person has his or her own gifts.

3. The children in our congregation know that women can be pastors and perform all the duties of pastoral ministry. They also know that women and men can share those responsibilities as a team.
4. The congregation encourages the leadership of women and has licensed its second woman to the ministry in the last 10 years.
5. In the community, among the mainline churches, my ordination and my leadership skills are accepted and welcomed.

Yes, progress has occurred for women in the ministry. Is there room for more? Of course! In the future I hope to see:

1. Congregations encouraging women of all ages to examine their gifts for ministry through the licensing process as an exploration step before ordination;
2. A mentor system developed that pairs new clergywomen with experienced women in ministry;
3. More congregations willing to serve as field education placements for women seminarians;
4. Financial assistance provided for seminarians who want a one-year internship in a congregation where a clergywoman would be her supervisor;
5. Additional women faculty and staff at the seminary and in ministry training programs who have had ministerial experience.

I am grateful for the progress that has occurred for women in the ministry over the last 20 years. I know that progress was born out of the struggle and pain of many women who felt God's call to ministry but were not given the opportunity to pursue it. While my experience in the pastoral ministry has been relatively easy compared to these sisters, I give thanks that they broke some solid ground before me. Because of their struggle the path began to take shape, for me, for you, and for women yet to be born.

**Bonnie pastors the Modesto Church of the Brethren, Modesto, Calif., with her husband Ken. She is the mother of two children, Jesse and Elizabeth. In her free time she enjoys traveling, flower gardening, movies, curling up with a good book, and going to the ocean or the mountains.**

**by Dorothy Nickel Friesen**

## **Go, my sister! (but be wise and be aware)**

### **Part I: Back then**

I entered the hallowed halls of seminary training in the fall of 1971 (Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Ind.). Intrigued with the atmosphere (it even smelled academic!), I sat in on classes for two years as an audit student. For those years, I watched women struggle in classes, yearning for ministry but finding little voice. There were no full-time women faculty members. There were no women in administration. There was no childcare facility. Coming to seminary with pastoring as a specific goal—well, I never heard that from women. Few women received degrees (only two women received degrees in 1972, 1973 and 1974) but education was happening.

Small ad hoc study and support groups for women were sprouting, and from them came the germ of an idea: a course on "women in church and society" as part of the AMBS curriculum. The proposal was accepted by the faculty, and in the fall of 1973 more than 50 people registered for the new course. I served on the steering committee which designed that course and supervised its weekly content with John H. Yoder as faculty advisor. It was a time when ideas were generated, discussions were passionate, and women were changing the nature of theological education in the Mennonite world.

It might be seen, in retrospect, as a time of success. After all, what other course enjoyed such broad enrollment? After all, wasn't this the beginning of feminist consciousness in an academic setting which trained people for leadership? After all, didn't women finally have a voice in the shaping of their education? It was so.

But although I was, by then, a three-year resident of that academic community, I accumulated only a total of 21 hours of credit. In addition to being a student I was a



"Three-fourths of both men and women favored women serving as deaconesses. However, fewer than half thought that tasks such as chairing the board of elders, preaching and conducting communion, funerals, weddings, baptisms and ordinations were appropriate for women."

spouse working one-half time to support our family and a mother with an infant daughter. The realities of balancing academic work and

personal life were already overwhelming. I struggled with focus and career. Should I finish a degree? Beyond that, a kindly professor assured me that "professional ministry" was not a realistic goal for me: "You appear to have the talent for church ministry, but the church is not ready for you. Go back to the classroom and teach English."

Back then, moving ahead and standing still were the stuff of life.

## Part II: Just a while ago

I returned to AMBS in the fall of 1990, this time as an administrator. I had, in the intervening 20 years, acquired two advanced degrees, birthed another child, taught English and reading for more than 10 years, redirected my professional career to the pastorate, and devoted a major portion of my life to causes of peace and justice. A return to academia seemed unlikely and unappealing. But I accepted an unusual call: to share an administrative position with another woman (Gayle Gerber Koontz), teach one course on "Women in Ministry," and develop a continuing education program for pastors. This, it seemed, was progress.

It was a different world at Elkhart in the early 1990's. About 50 percent of the student body was women. Women students were almost nonchalant in their attitude about scholarship, about church positions and about their job future. Yes, women had anxieties but they also had compatriots who shared every class, every meeting and every graduation! Graduates, whether single or married, moved into pastorates with regularity, although not with ease. The pioneer days were over. This was a time of homesteading and staking claims of leadership.

I spent much time, however, listening to hesitant voices. The women students, although successful in the classroom and genuine in their spiritual integrity, were doubting their abilities, talents and possibilities. I coaxed. I encouraged. I wept and laughed. How could God be tolerating this incredible mixture of overcautious Christians? Spring was the time for candidating but it was mostly a time of anxiety and fear. The resurrection stories needed to happen at the seminary at 3003 Benham Avenue just as surely as in some tomb in Palestine. There was reason for doubting the resurrection—of women in leadership.

A 1992 study conducted by Renee Sauder reported that three-fourths of both men and women favored women serving as deaconesses. However, fewer than half thought that tasks such as chairing the board of elders, preaching and conducting communion, funerals, weddings, baptisms and ordinations were appropriate for women ("Mennonite Women in Pastoral Leadership," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, October 1995, pp. 487-504).

This study, with its wealth of information supplied by women who had served in pastoral leadership from the early 1970s to the early 1990s, was a mixture of good news and bad news. Serious progress had been made. Women were competently, lovingly and respectfully serving as leaders. However, women were also lonely, discouraged in managing church budgets, and perplexed in recruiting members and stimulating members to service (p. 499). Despite the successes of many women, there was still incredible risk and incredible strength needed to embark in a nontraditional role.

## Part III: Now

Three years ago, a large (membership of 550) Mennonite congregation called me to serve as senior pastor. This call to leave academic halls and return to padded pews was perplexing. Where should women serve the church? Was shaping women and men in their ministerial formation in seminary the "main" thing? Or was serving as a pastor and leader the way to demonstrate not only the possibilities but the realities of leadership? In the end, of course, these questions are not mutually exclusive.

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**"This particular congregation has called women to pastoral leadership for the past 20 years. I claim the many women role models who, for centuries, have lived out their faith with conviction and courage. I also feel the discouragement and loneliness that come with being a pioneer."**

In these last years of the millennium women are serving as theologians and professors who shape students' lives. Women are serving as lead pastors, co-pastors and solo pastors in rural and urban settings all across the continent—and world! Academic courses list women scholars in their bibliographies. Speakers, lecturers, planners, leaders and administrators are people of both genders. Inclusive language is regarded as the norm in seminaries and many congregations. Our prayers and our music reveal the mystery and reality of a God beyond gender.

I am thriving in my role in the congregation. I feel the progress of women in Mennonite church leadership as a benefit. This particular congregation has called women to pastoral leadership for the past 20 years. I claim the many women role models who, for centuries, have lived out their faith with conviction and courage.

I also feel the discouragement and loneliness that come with being a pioneer. I listen to other women who cannot find church positions, who lose hope and who live in conflict. I personally struggle with knowing enough, praying enough and serving enough. Some days I work too hard and other days I yearn for more hours to do what I love. It is a mixture of blessing and challenge.

I urge women of faith to respond to God's nudging and Christ's call to "follow me." Be wise. Be aware.

**Dorothy serves as pastor of First Mennonite Church, Bluffton, Ohio. A few of her favorite things include Sunday afternoon naps, cooking with chocolate, and reading—anything. She is married to Richard and they are the parents of two young adult daughters. She has degrees in education and religion from the University of Kansas, and a master of divinity from St. Paul School of Theology, Kansas City, Mo. In her spare time, she serves on the Integration Committee for the General Conference Mennonite Church and the Mennonite Church.**

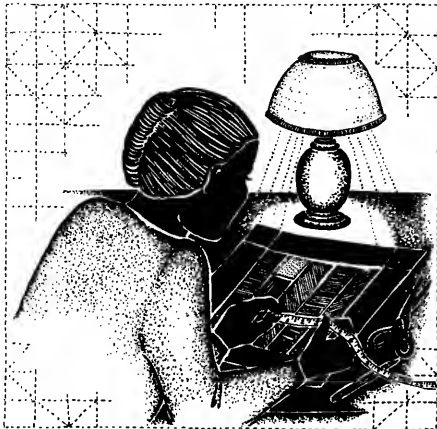


by Jean Janzen

## Women of the cloth

1

My mother sings "Rescue the Perishing"  
as she quilts with the others,  
her stitches are deep and quick  
into the ocean waves which vibrate  
orange and green, barely contained  
in the purple border.  
She has snipped hundred of triangles,  
then joined them with her treadle machine,  
her small feet pumping into high speed.  
Jesus, Jesus, she sings into her rapid  
stitches. Jesus naked in the barn,  
bruised on the windy hills,  
the women wrapping him in cloths.  
And yet he escapes like light,  
vibrating through the prism  
of the story, faster  
than her eye can follow.



2

Emma Yoder measures each corner  
carefully, takes her time.  
The kingdom comes inch by inch  
like the "Lobsang" with its fourteen  
verses, its long, embroidered notes.  
Oh, how these colors praise him,  
the bars pulsing their blue  
against the red of cranberries.  
She must break perfection with one piece;  
she will make it yellow, startling,  
the color of God's eye burning  
among the wheat shocks,  
his flame licking the stubble  
until the whole field glows.  
Broad as her husband's shoulders  
approaching her in lamplight—  
what no fence can contain.



3

As a child I heard it in music,  
saw it in the sky, something  
offering itself, reaching out.  
Sometimes in the beauty of fabric,  
bolts and bolts of extravagant colors,  
the plush of velvet.  
Once, from a remnant, my mother  
made me an ivory satin blouse.  
All season in church  
I stroked it as I sang,  
smooth as sky, or my heart,  
which I must open for Jesus  
to come in, the blood flaring out  
like a rose. Then he would unfurl  
the white percale, the preacher said,  
so I could walk the long road.  
Trying not to leave a single stain,  
I will walk until I die,  
when I will sprout wings.  
I will never have to touch  
the earth again.

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by Di Brandt

## *questions i asked my mother*

look when grampa died last week everybody said he's better off where he is because he's in heaven now he's with God we should be happy he's gone home but yesterday when they put him in the ground the minister said he's going to be there till the last trumpet raises the quick & the dead for the final judgement now look mom i can't figure out which is true it's got to be either up or down i mean what's he gonna do swoop back into his body at the last moment so he can rise with the trumpet call or what i got to know mom what do you think my mother is sewing she's incredibly nimble with her fingers my father marvels at them she's sewed all our clothes since we were born embroidered designed them she bites the thread carefully before answering now Diana she says & then stops i can see my question is too much for her Dad she calls into the other room come here a minute & listen to what this girl is asking i have to repeat the whole thing my voice rising desperately well when grampa died last week everybody said he's better off where he is because he's in heaven now he's with God but yesterday when they put him in the ground the minister said he's going to be there till the last trumpet raises the quick & the dead for the final judgement & i can't figure out which is true he's got to be either up or down what's he gonna do swoop back into his body at the last moment so he can rise with the trumpet call or what they look at each other complicity in their eyes i don't think that's a very nice thing to say about grampa she begins she wouldn't say this if we were alone it's an introduction she lets him finish with the big stuff it's your attitude he says i've noticed lately everything you say has this questioning tone I don't think you're really interested in grampa or your faith what you really want is to make trouble for mom & me you've always been like that you're always trying to figure everything out your own way instead of submitting quietly to the teachings of the church when are you going to learn not everything has to make sense your brain is not

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the most important thing in the world what counts is your attitude  
& your faith your willingness to accept the mystery of God's  
ways another time i asked her mom i been thinking about  
arithmetic & what i'm wondering is do you think arithmetic was  
invented or discovered i mean it seems like it must have been  
invented because all these signs numbers & things they didn't find  
those lying on a rock somewhere people must have made them  
up but on the other hand it really works i mean do you think  
anybody could have invented 10 times 10 is a hundred & if so  
who could it have been well i just don't know she says  
wonderingly i've never really thought about it you sure come up  
with the strangest questions really i don't know how you got to be  
so smart sometimes i just felt i would burst with all the  
unanswered questions inside me i thought of writing the *Country  
Guide* question & answer column but i didn't have stationery &  
anyway no one ever asked questions like that i imagined  
heaven as a huge schoolroom where all the questions of the  
universe were answered once & for all God was the cosmic school  
inspector pointing eternally to a chalkboard as big as the sky  
just imagine i thought Abraham & Isaac & all those guys they  
already know everything they knew about relativity centuries before  
Einstein instantly like that they don't ever have to think one  
time i asked her about bread i loved smelling the brown yeast  
in the huge blue speckled bowl its sweetish ferment watching it  
bubble & churn how does it turn into bread i asked her well  
the yeast is what makes it rise she said when you add warm water  
it grows as you can see yes but how does it turn into bread i  
mean it comes out a completely different thing what exactly  
happens to it in there in the oven why does heat turn it into  
something full of holes we can eat she sighed my mother  
sighed a lot when i was around you're asking me something  
i can't tell you she said now help me punch down the dough  
i sat in front of the oven all afternoon bathed in warm kitchen  
smells trying to figure it out someday i said to myself someday  
i will find out i will find out everything

Reprinted by permission from *questions i asked my mother*.  
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"Because I was a woman they thought I did not belong in full-time ministry. I began to feel like I was fighting a losing battle, and I questioned if youth ministry was truly what God was calling me to do. I loved doing ministry through my internship, but my educational world seemed to be full of contradictions."

by Audrey Poetker-Thiessen

**n.**

i am the preacher  
the daughter of menno  
the storyteller to grandfathers  
the teacher of old women

let the elders come forth  
from their houses  
let them call to me  
in the yellow air

that the calf is fattened  
the *vaspa* is set  
& i am no longer  
a stranger among my people

Reprinted by permission from *standing all the night through*. © Turnstone Press.



by Jennifer Bowling

## Some would be pastors, according to their gifts

As a recent graduate of Fresno Pacific University I often find myself reminiscing about my days in college. I think back on the fun I had with my friends, the late nights studying and all of the challenges I overcame. Those experiences shaped me into the person I am today. One of the greatest ongoing struggles I faced during my time at Fresno Pacific was the continuous questioning of my desire as a woman to pursue full-time ministry. The resistance I experienced was from my fellow students. Members of the faculty at Fresno Pacific were a support and refuge for me throughout this struggle. They modeled the response I longed for from my peers.

I was raised in a nondenominational church, but I did not accept Christ until I was in high school. After that my relationship with Jesus became the most important thing in my life. I did not have any Christian friends or a youth group to be a part of throughout high school, but I continued to seek God earnestly.

As an 18-year-old first year student at Fresno Pacific I began to feel God tugging at my heart and giving me the desire to help kids discover a true relationship with Jesus. I felt so strongly that God was calling me to this that I declared a major in youth ministry. Up to this point in my life, I had always been encouraged to pursue my dreams and not to let the opinions of others get in the way. I had seen how God could work through anyone as long as he or she was open to God's call. I was excited about the opportunity for God to use me to reach students. I never thought the fact that I was a woman could be a reason not to pursue full-time ministry since I felt so strongly that this is what God was calling me to.

The unqualified encouragement to pursue my dreams ended the day I started taking ministry courses at Fresno Pacific University. As part of the ministry program at Fresno Pacific I was required to take certain courses as well as intern at a church to get some practical experi-

ence. As I started my course work and began my internship at a Presbyterian Church, I realized people responded to my desire to go into full-time ministry in very different ways. In fact, the responses I received were so different that I often felt as though I was living in two totally different worlds.

I started my internship at the beginning of my sophomore year of college. I was working under a female youth pastor who had been in full-time ministry at that church for five years. Each week I spent much of my free time at the church, planning lessons and building relationships with students. I loved what I was doing and could not see myself doing anything else. My role as an intern included teaching Sunday school, helping to lead worship on Sunday mornings, teaching lessons and games during youth group, and spending time with the students. The students, their parents, the pastor and the congregation were extremely supportive of me and what I was doing. I was blessed with an incredible church family and a pastor who affirmed my gifts. All of this encouraged me to continue to pursue full-time ministry.

Meanwhile, back on campus at Fresno Pacific I was working to complete my degree in contemporary Christian ministries. Because Fresno Pacific is a small institution, many of the required classes are only offered every other semester. As a result, once I began my ministry course work, most of the time I found myself in classes with the same students. Throughout my four years I built close friendships with three of the guys—Tommy, Chad and Travis (not their real names). Their friendship did not come without a lot of hurt.

When I first met Tommy, Chad and Travis I still had not quite caught on to the idea that being a woman in full-time ministry caused concern for some people. I entered



my first year thinking all Christians believed exactly the same thing, but I quickly discovered this was not true. Tommy, Chad and Travis all came from strong Mennonite Brethren (MB) families. Each had grown up in an MB church and could tell you just about anything you wanted or needed to know about that particular denomination. I had never heard of an MB until my first week at Fresno Pacific, but I was eager to learn about the denomination.

As I began to build friendships with these three fellow students I quickly discovered that even though I wasn't MB we still had much in common. We each had a heart for ministry. We each cared deeply for people. We each were seeking God's will for our lives. It seemed like the more time the four of us spent together, the deeper our conversations got. We talked about theology, ministry and relationships, and I learned a great deal from them. But there were also many conversations in which they made hurtful remarks because I was a woman desiring to go into full-time ministry.

One incident I distinctly remember was in my Christian Leadership and Administration class. The class was made up of students who were currently involved in Christian leadership (primarily in churches) and included Tommy, Chad and Travis. For the final project each student was required to pick a leadership topic relevant to their lives. We had to do research, conduct interviews with pastors or leaders regarding our topic and give an in-class presentation. The three women in our class chose topics that somehow related to the issue of women in ministry. Each

**"They began to understand that being ordained into ministry isn't dependent on gender, but rather on God's call and a person's gifts."**

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of us had encountered opposition to our participation in ministry, and we wanted to explore some of these issues further. The professor was supportive.

The day of my presentation, as the professor announced my topic, "Balancing your ministry and life as a single woman," I heard Tommy rather loudly question, "Why do we have to listen to another presentation on women in ministry?" After his comment, all of the guys sitting around him laughed and then moaned and groaned. I just looked at them, moved to the front of the classroom and began my presentation. I was bothered by what Tommy had said and did not know why my friends were acting this way.

The incident in class that day was not an isolated one. I did not understand why they had such difficulty accepting my desire to go into ministry—especially after the many conversations we had about how God works through different people to reach kids. The four of us were all seeking the same thing, but because I was a woman they thought I did not belong in full-time ministry. I began to feel like I was fighting a losing battle, and I questioned if youth ministry was truly what God was calling me to do. I loved doing ministry through my internship, but my educational world seemed to be full of contradictions—support from some and opposition from others.

Later that semester, Tommy, Chad and Travis were required to observe another church's youth program as part of a class assignment. The three of them came to me and asked if they could observe the program where I was an intern. At first I could hardly believe my ears! They wanted to observe me, a woman, doing church ministry. The thought made me nervous, but I was thrilled that they had even asked. For the first time my two worlds—my academics and my internship—would come together.

The night Tommy, Chad and Travis came to observe me was the beginning of reconciliation and understanding between them and me. They were able to watch me do what I love. They were able to see first-hand the relationships I had with some of the kids. They were able to see that the way God was using me in the lives of these students was a result of my gifts and calling and was not limited by my gender.

Our conversations after that night changed. They had grown up accepting the idea that women are not supposed to be ordained into full-time ministry. But now, after seeing first-hand how God was using me, they began to question their opinions. They could easily make a blanket statement about the issue when they had not seen any women in ministry. Now however, they had a face and a ministry to put with this particular question. It challenged their perspective.

After that night the three of us had many more conversations about women in ministry. For Tommy, Chad and Travis, the idea of women pursuing full-time ministry was extremely unsettling. Perhaps that was because of what they had always been told, or maybe because they had never been in a church where a woman was pastoring. Whatever the reason, God used me and the ministry I was involved in to open their eyes. They began to grapple with the possibility that God does call both men and women to full-time ministry. They began to understand that being ordained into ministry isn't dependent on gender, but rather on God's call and a person's gifts.

I have graduated and am working full-time at the church where I did my internship. As I look back on my experience with Tommy, Chad and Travis, I see how God used it to draw me closer to Him and to open the minds of my friends. Through all of the questioning and the challenges God made His call on my life clear. If the way had been easy and I had not faced any opposition, I would not have diligently sought out what God was calling me to do. Our conversations brought pain, but in the end also brought change and understanding. All four of us are now working full-time with students at different churches on the West Coast. We talk to each other often. We give and receive support, ideas and encouragement more mutually than ever.

**Jennifer graduated from Fresno Pacific University (Fresno, Calif.) in 1997 with degrees in contemporary Christian ministries and psychology. She is currently working at Dinuba Presbyterian Church (Calif.) as Director of Student Ministries.**

by Carrie Hinterberger

## Reflections while baking cookies

In June of 1994, the Committee on Women's Concerns of British Columbia sponsored my attendance at the Women Doing Theology Conference in Bluffton, Ohio. This was a life-changing event for me. The connectedness I felt at this conference, as we grappled with the themes of atonement, forgiveness and Anabaptist feminism, both affirmed and challenged me. The creative worship services, the art, the poetry, the music, the feeling of acceptance and those wonderful conversations are with me still.

My sponsorship at this conference was given with the understanding that I would become part of the committee to plan a conference for the following year in British Columbia. I became part of the Women in Ministry Committee working under the umbrella of MCC BC Women's Concerns. Our conference planned for May 26-28, 1995, was to celebrate global sisterhood, and we chose the theme "Unity and Uniqueness in Christ." In keeping with this theme we invited Susan Classen, a worker in Bolivia and El Salvador, and Elizabeth Tapia, Professor of Theology at Union Theological Seminary and lecturer at the Institute of Women's Studies in the Philippines, to be our plenary speakers.

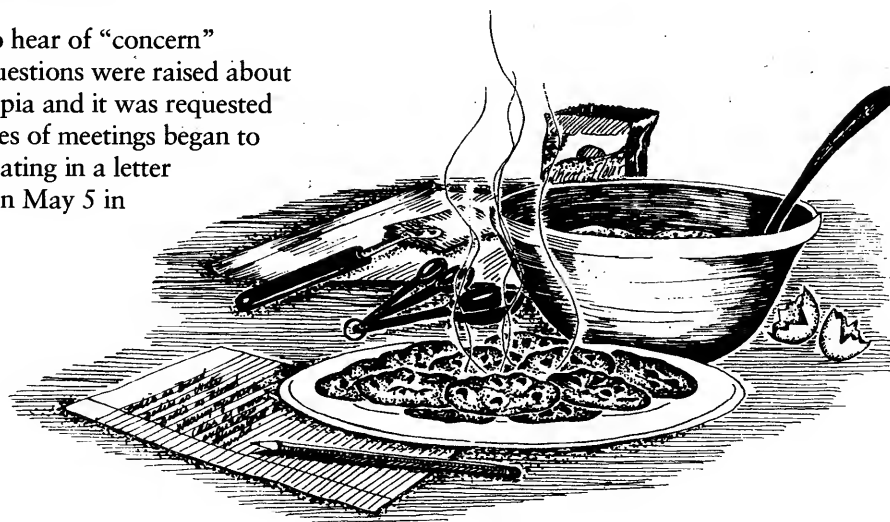
In March 1995, we began to hear of "concern" regarding this conference, questions were raised about the theology of Elizabeth Tapia and it was requested that we dis-invite her. A series of meetings began to address the problem, culminating in a letter received by our committee on May 5 in

which the board of MCC BC withdrew their support and their blessing for the conference. On May 10, the Women in Ministry Committee met to pray and discern a course of action. We made the unanimous decision to go ahead with the conference as planned. Following our decision to go ahead, the leadership of the Mennonite Brethren Conference sent a fax to pastors of BC Mennonite Brethren churches warning their constituents not to attend this conference.

On November 8, 1995, the Women in Ministry Committee met with the MCC BC Board and the five pastors who raised the objections to the conference. The meeting was capably chaired and congenial, and attenders attempted to resolve the issues. A joint statement was published following the meeting.

The BC Women in Ministry Committee is still active and continues to operate under the umbrella of the BC Committee on Women's Concerns. On October 5, 1996, a one-day conference was held called "ReMembering, ReAffirming, ReJoySing." The plenary speakers were David Schroeder and Kathy Nichol. In an atmosphere of mutuality and respect we told stories and listened to the wisdom we had gained from our experiences. We have planned another conference for March 5-6, 1999 with Maxine Hancock as presenter.

continued on page 14



**"The creative worship services,  
the art, the poetry, the music,  
the feeling of acceptance and  
those wonderful conversations  
are with me still."**



The following is a reflection on my experiences as part of this committee:

#### **April 1994 to March 1995**

Excitement, joy, energy, synergy

Building on experiences in other countries, planning a Celebration of Global Sisterhood

Such a sense of community

Exploring the Mystery and Seasons of Spirituality and Life

Bodies as Bread

Bodies as Water

Bodies as Blood

Weaving together the colors of women's experiences throughout the world: "Unity and Uniqueness in Christ," scheduled for May 26-28, 1995

#### **April 1995**

Incredulity, shame and surprise at our naiveté

the accusations: "radical feminist conference" "New Age" "walking on hot coals" "burning grass" "goddess worship" "deliberate attempt to oppose MB polity on women as senior pastors"

Patronizing, threatening, refusal to distribute the brochures in some churches

Solidarity, sisterhood, the unanimous resolve to continue despite the distortions, misrepresentation, lack of ability to talk directly to the accusers

#### **May 1, 1995**

Meeting with the MCC BC board, not feeling heard

mistrust, broken relationships, a feeling that nothing we could say would make a difference

mistrust, helplessness

mistrust, no communication about the decision

mistrust, request for word on the decision

mistrust, no word

A pastor states, "If this Conference goes ahead we will call a meeting of our churches and disassociate ourselves from MCC."

#### **May 5, 1995**

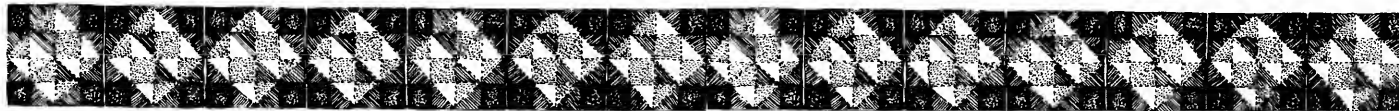
Letter from the MCC BC Board: support and blessing withdrawn

Grief, loss, mistrust

Do people actually believe these accusations against us?  
Do our years of service in the church count for nothing?  
Do we have a voice?

What are the pastors afraid of? Who are those who object to this conference? How many? Why can't we meet with them, face to face, to resolve these issues?

Mistrust



### **May 10, 1995**

Prayerful consideration, agonizing grief, torturous decision-making, pain, mistrust

Solidarity, sisterhood, unanimous agreement to go ahead with the Conference

### **May 26-28, 1995**

Women in Ministry Conference

Exhilaration, tears of joy, inspiration, community, meaningful worship

validation, a spirit of being included in God's creation, connectedness

the fellowship of women and men, beautiful liturgy

the richness of communion with God and others, weeping and hugging

community, meaningful worship

the harmony of song, different voices joined in praise

community, meaningful worship,

poetry, art, dance, strength

sisterhood, meaningful worship

Bodies as Bread

Bodies as Water

Bodies as Blood

### **November 8, 1995**

Meeting to Discuss Concerns  
Arising from the May Conference

At last we can meet face to face with those who opposed our conference

Miscommunication, misunderstanding, panic around process

### **May 1998**

Caution, watchfulness, working through the process of forgiveness

careful consideration to every word

mistrust, grief at the loss of relationship, wondering why there is so much fear

looking forward to a glorious time of revival when "we are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

**Carrie lives in beautiful British Columbia and greatly appreciates God's wondrous world. She is married to Herb and has two almost-grown children, Greg and Amy. Carrie is a part-time teacher/librarian, the chair of Sardis DoorWay for Mothers and their Preschool Children, an avid reader, a good friend and a member of Sardis Community Church.**

"There are no conference restrictions regarding women in ministry. Women can preach and be pastors. But openness to women's leadership varies from congregation to congregation. I am the only female pastor in the conference."



by Maria de los Santos,  
translated by Bob Buxman

## Nicaraguan pastor faces her fear

*The following is adapted from an interview with Maria de los Santos, pastor of a growing rural church in San Jose de la Gracia, Nicaragua. The church is evangelistic in word and deed, serving the community in food relief, sewing classes, funeral home services and general participation in community life. The congregation belongs to Fraternidade, one of three Anabaptist conferences in Nicaragua. The Fraternidade Conference was born in 1979 of missionary efforts sponsored by the Evangelical Mennonite Conference (Steinbeck, Man.) and currently has 20 active churches. There are also two other Anabaptist conferences in Nicaragua, Brethren in Christ (80 churches) and Rosedale Mennonite (80 churches). The three conventions are independent, but relate fraternally and together have created the Anabaptist Emergency Commission and the Peace and Justice Commission.*

### Progress

I am pleased to say that women are participating at all levels in the *Fraternidade* Conference. At the national level, women are serving on all the boards except one. Women chair the Christian Education Board, the Bible Institute and the women's organization. Women are members of the Council of Pastors and the Youth Committee. Women had been active participants in the National Council until the most recent election at the annual assembly. Men had been supportive of our involvement, encouraging us to participate.

Women can work freely as ministers and servants of Christ. Women have the same opportunities as men to educate ourselves for our roles with both secular and theological education. There are no conference restrictions regarding women in ministry. Women can preach and be pastors. But openness to women's leadership varies from congregation to congregation. I am the only female pastor in the conference (20 churches). But in the

other congregations women are active as elders and deacons. The evangelism and discipleship teams in our churches are up to 98 percent women. The youth groups usually consist of more young women than young men and often are led by young women.

Unlike some of the other church groups in Nicaragua, we do not have rules regarding dress or length of hair. Our primary concern is not what we look like but what our relationships are with our brothers and sisters and our neighbors in the community.

I feel strongly that women in leadership do not displace men because we are not in competition. Rather men and women both are gifted by God. Our active and progressive role in the church is only restoring to women the role that society has robbed from us.

However, incidents are happening today in our conference which could possibly set us back.

### Setbacks

I fear that the new leaders elected at our last annual assembly are turning a number of these good things bad. There is a big division in the conference and this never results in good for men or women. With division often comes competition. For example since the annual assembly, there are women who want to take over parts of the work I do for the conference. I wish there were opportunities for us to be involved alongside each other rather than instead of each other.

The new leaders place a great deal of importance on degrees and titles. Some people who are willing to serve but who have little or no training are being denied opportunity. Such requirements usually affect women more than men because women typically have less opportunity to gain education or training. This produces jealousy and bad feelings. This setback is more a reflection of the new leadership than a backlash against women specifically. But women will be disadvantaged or marginalized from leadership as a result.

This is not to say there were not some difficulties before. The church in San Jose de la Gracia called me first to co-pastor a number of years ago. The senior pastor left the church quite suddenly 1994, and I was left as the pastor. There were immediately complaints. I was only 30 years

**"I want to be married and have children. But more than that, in the deepest part of my being, I want to please Christ. I desire a child to hold and care for and raise. But my stronger desire is to love God, be loved by God and relate to God."**

**"Our active and progressive role in the church is only restoring to women the role that society has robbed from us."**

**"Some people who are willing to serve but who have little or no training are being denied opportunity. Such requirements usually affect women more than men because women typically have less opportunity to gain education or training."**

old and a woman. I had only come to faith four years before. Everyone knew me as an activist (I was very involved with the Sandinistas). It bothered people in the church and other pastors in the conference that a young woman and new Christian had risen so fast in the church to become a pastor. The first year was extremely difficult. Meetings were called behind my back. There was envy and gossip. The church developed a bad reputation in the community. While I preached people didn't listen, they just visited in little groups. I succeeded by prayer, fasting and reading Scripture, and God blessed me with a small group of five people who rallied around me and supported me.

Two years ago there were a few people who said I could not be a pastor because I was not married. It was a difficult time for me. But I'm fully accepted now, and these few have become quiet.

I have also had resistance from some who do not like my directness. When it comes to conduct in a person's life, I believe the Bible is clear about many things. If a person is involved in misconduct, as a pastor, I must correct him or her. Some men have not liked the direct way in which I do this. These have been learning experiences for me. I am a direct person, but I used to be even more direct. Now I am more open. I have learned the importance of expressing respect for all, even those with whom I am in conflict. I try to share my point of view and listen to the other. I might not agree with the person, but I respect the person. I never want to destroy the person.

This conviction to respect all was tested the first time I co-pastored with a man. This man did not respect me. He tried to divide the church and displace me, but the church would not follow him. Now it is much better. I co-pastor with another brother, and we work well together. He respects my authority. He never passes over me. This reinforces our partnership. When I'm gone, he steps in naturally. When I return, he makes room for me. We are not in competition. Instead, we walk together in this pilgrimage. We are a team. We recognize the importance of each other and our gifts.

A challenge I face within myself is fear. I fear I will not be able to fulfill my pastoral role because I'm a woman, because I'm single or because I do not have the experience or the proper education. When I have fear, I get quiet and lose confidence. There are some strong messages and

expectations in my culture, for example that one needs to be married to have value. I'm single and young (34). I want to be married and have children. But more than that, in the deepest part of my being, I want to please Christ. I desire a child to hold and care for and raise. But my stronger desire is to love God, be loved by God and relate to God. I hope in God in the midst of my fear.

Being single has its advantages. I have lots of time for the Lord and the church. God has first place in my life. The disadvantage is that when work is hard and heavy, I carry it alone. I have no one to carry it with me. Friends are there for me, but not in the same way that I imagine a husband would be. My friends have their own responsibilities and cares. But this disadvantage is a challenge, not an obstacle for me in my work as pastor.

## **Support**

The national council has given me the opportunity to pastor. People in the council have consistently trusted me. They have given me moral and spiritual help. They have stimulated me with words of blessing and affirmation and have expressed concern when I was down. Members of the local church have also strongly supported my ministry and the work of the church. They always respond to the call to service and work. What we propose as a church, we accomplish as a church. At a more personal level, my mother has always been there for me, and so have special friends. They listen, encourage and pray for me. In the midst of difficulties I cling to the words of Philippians 4:13, "Christ strengthens me." I have often needed the assurance of that strength.

My hope is that women and men will be able to work together in the church, united, as leaders, motivating one another. We need to do this to glorify God—to minister with mutual respect for each other, as servants together, as equals.

**Maria is a graduate of Semilla, an Anabaptist seminary based in Guatemala City. She currently pastors a growing rural church in San Jose de la Gracia, Nicaragua.**

**Bob has spent the past six years in Central America with MCC, first in Costa Rica and now in Nicaragua. He was pastor of a Mennonite Brethren congregation in Dallas, Ore. for 14 years.**

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### Women in ministry

**Barb and Richard Gehring** became pastors of Manhattan (Kan.) Mennonite Fellowship in September. Richard ended a pastorate at Sermon on the Mount Mennonite Church, Sioux Falls, S.D.

## News and verbs

Eleanor Epp-Stobbe has resigned from her position as **Women's Concerns Co-ordinator for MCC Canada**, and has accepted the position of Interim Director for Voices for Non-Violence, a Manitoba agency that serves as a resource empowering congregations to respond to domestic violence. Eleanor is also teaching a course in feminist theology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College this year.

Heather Block has resigned from her position as **Co-ordinator of Voices for Non-Violence** and has accepted a position as Executive Director at the Laurel Centre, a Winnipeg agency that provides counseling for women who were sexually abused as children. In addition to working with Voices for Non-Violence for the last seven years, Heather had been working part-time as a counselor at the Laurel Centre since 1996, and formerly served with Mennonite Voluntary Service in Cincinnati in a half-way house for women involved in the correctional system.

A new MCC Women's Concerns sponsored book, ***Women and Men: Gender in the Church***, edited by Carol Penner, (\$9.99 U.S./\$14.25 Cdn.) is available from Herald Press. In this thought-provoking book, male and female writers tackle important subjects: What does the Bible have to say about gender? What does it mean to live in a female or male body? How do we create homes and relationships that value men and women equally? How does gender intersect with race or age? How do we raise children in nonsexist ways? The authors explore what it means to be women and men together in the church and community. Discussion questions follow each chapter.

"This book looks at the topic in an engaging way through the use of many personal stories. Issues jump out of the chapters. An excellent resource for group discussion."

—Ted Koontz, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary

***Hill Station Teacher: A Life with India in It***, by Ruth Unrau, tells of her family's experiences in India during the years she and her husband worked at Woodstock School. It is available from Kidron Creek Publishers, Box 214, North Newton KS 67117 (\$12.95 U.S. plus \$2 shipping). Unrau has also written *A Time to Bind and A Time to Loose*, a history of the General Conference Mennonite Church mission involvement in India, published by the Commission on Overseas Mission.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is published bimonthly by the MCC Committees on Women's Concerns. We believe that Jesus Christ teaches equality of all persons. By sharing information and ideas, the committees strive to promote new relationships and corresponding supporting structures through which women and men can grow toward wholeness and mutuality. Articles and views presented in REPORT do not necessarily reflect official positions of the Committees on Women's Concerns.

WOMEN'S CONCERNS REPORT is edited by Gwen Groff. Layout by Beth Oberholtzer Design.

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## Letter

I am a frequent reader of *Women's Concerns Report* and have appreciated the topics and contents. When I picked up the issue on Lesbians in the church I simultaneously wondered what I would find and knew some of the answers. My personal stance is one of being welcoming and affirming of gays and lesbians in the church. But I also agree to disagree with viewpoints that differ from mine. When I began to read Martha Pepper's article I was able to maintain my acceptance of her viewpoint until I reached the paragraph where she describes Angie and her transformation into a "young woman." This was based on the fact that Angie had grown long "flowing

hair" and a "winning smile." At that point I felt the article lost credibility. For Day Seven Ministries, it is not enough to save lesbians' souls from the homosexual lifestyle, they have to socialize them to be "feminine" in order to complete the process. It exposes the fact that so much of this debate is based not just on souls, but on conformity to a given group's idea of heterosexual socialization. The implications of Ms. Pepper's feminization is an insult not only to lesbians in our midst, but to heterosexual women who wear pants and have short hair.

—Beth Sholly, Goshen, Ind.



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